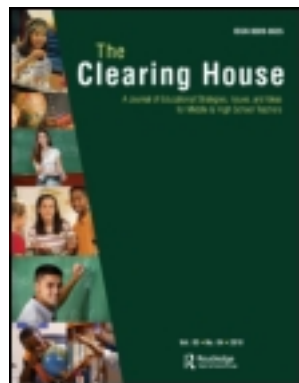


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Publisher: Routledge

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## The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/vtch20>

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Version of record first published: 31 Jan 2013.

To cite this article: Richard F. Bowman (2013): Learning Leadership Skills in Middle School, The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas, 86:2, 59-63

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2012.744291>

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# Learning Leadership Skills in Middle School

RICHARD F. BOWMAN

**Abstract:** For middle school students, the essence of 21st-century leadership development is being “in influence” versus being “in control.” A core student leadership skill involves listening intently to others, framing others’ concerns, and advancing the other person’s interests. Creating contexts in which middle school students feel a profound impulse to dialogue regarding common cause enables students to experience the dynamics of leadership development firsthand. In solving large-scale, intractable problems, the distinctive leadership trait of our nation’s founders was not that of leaders-as-heroes but rather that of leaders-as-hosts. The leadership lesson for middle school students as tomorrow’s leaders is: it is time for all the heroes to go home.

**Keywords:** leadership development, leadership skills, leadership as dialogue, serving leadership

Leadership is everyone’s responsibility. No one has permission to stand aside. In his last speech, shortly before he died, John W. Gardner delivered a thunderous exhortation to students, educators, and citizens who seemingly give only fractured thought to the well-being of their schools, their community, and their nation. Gardner exclaimed: “Who gave them permission to stand aside? I’m asking you to issue a wake-up call to those people—a bugle call in their ear. And I want you to tell them that this nation could die of comfortable indifference to the problems that only citizens can solve. Tell them that” (Hesselbein 2003, 4). For today’s middle school students, the larger implication of Gardner’s exhortation is that leadership responsibility in a globally interconnected, interdependent world must be shouldered by everyone, right now.

## Leading Yourself

Before one can lead others, one first has to lead oneself. Leadership development for middle school

students begins with a quest to discover who you are, what you care about, and why you do what you do at pivotal moments in your life. Socrates framed the importance of leading from one’s own deepest truths: “An unexamined life is not worth living.” To be self-governing requires being reflective “about our virtues and our vices and be rigorous about our own truths” (Seidman 2007, 292). Ultimately, “the mastery of the art of leadership comes with the mastery of the self, and so developing leadership is a process of developing the self” (Kouzes and Posner 2011, 22). At their best, leadership development opportunities for middle school students summon them to pursue an inner journey, not only so that they can live more productive lives but also so that they can have a greater life-giving impact on the world around them (Palmer 2001).

In truth, middle school students bring their convictions and beliefs about what is real and powerful in life to class each day regarding a variety of topics ranging from environmental stewardship, opportunity for all, and the rule of law to charity and compassion for others. To engage and sustain middle school students in this inner journey, students might, for example, be invited to pen journal entries periodically throughout the school year regarding school or societal issues using the format: “I know who I was, I know who I am, and I know where I want to be as a person.” The leadership lesson for middle school students is that if one is not clear about his or her personal values and convictions, it is hard to imagine how one could enlist others to follow. After all, “if you wouldn’t follow you, why should anyone else?” (Kouzes and Posner 2011, 25).

## Leading through Character

To lead others, middle school students have to believe that they matter and that they can have a positive impact on their classmates and school. They have to believe that what they do in class, in their school, and in their community counts for something; that their words and

actions can move and inspire those in their midst. The most powerful form of human influence is inspiration. Inspired conduct is internal and intrinsic. Inspired individuals possess a deep purpose greater than themselves as they seek to make a difference in the lives of others. In contrast, “whereas coercion and motivation happen *to* you, inspiration happens *in* you” (Seidman 2007, xxix). The overarching lesson for today’s middle school students is that contemporary leadership is more about inspiration than about coercion and extrinsic motivation. Tellingly, “leaders inspire, and seek to keep the atmosphere of inspiration—the call to significance—alive in others” (Seidman 2007, 287).

In *True North Groups*, George (2011) argued that the missing link in contemporary leadership development is having a safe place where individuals can share their experiences, beliefs, values, and motivations and gain a deeper understanding of who they are as well as learn to confront the barriers that prevent them from identifying with and influencing others. For middle school students in an era of increasing interconnectedness, encountering instructional contexts in which they feel a profound impulse to dialogue enables them to experience the dynamics of contemporary leadership development first-hand.

In response to recent negative portrayals of Native Americans in the mainstream media, for example, students from South Dakota’s Rosebud Sioux Reservation used classroom dialogue as a springboard to reaffirm that their community is about more than alcoholism, broken homes, and crime. In their student-produced video, *More Than That*, students used their bodies as signposts to signal to the world that they are not mere stock images of poverty, alcoholism, and violence and, importantly, that they are not victims. With words drawn on their hands, arms, and faces, students chronicled the distinctive traits that capture who they really are: humorous, intelligent, and creative. By refusing to be viewed as victims, students aspired to regain their freedom and control over their lives through their choices. The leadership lesson for middle school students is that we make choices about what we value. Our choices bring our values to life in the everydayness of our behavior. Almost daily, students make choices regarding their likes or dislikes, what they do or do not do, and what they contribute or do not contribute to their community. For the Rosebud students, perseverance in the face of adversity is a choice. For the Rosebud students, contributing something larger than themselves to their Native American community is a choice. For a Rosebud student, sending a text that reads “every day I choose not to give up” is a choice.

### Leading Others in the Smallest of Moments

Life in contemporary middle school classrooms and hallways constitutes an unrelenting stream of inter-

personal interactions and relationships. Before- and after-school text messages and Facebook posts serve to reinforce students’ sense that every moment matters relationally. These ubiquitous social interactions also serve to reveal both the promise and power of creating vibrant leadership connections in the smallest of everyday, ordinary moments. The fragmented reality of adolescent social interactions highlights a beckoning opportunity for middle school students to *learn to lead* through purposeful social interactions that can be harnessed to generate energy and direction around things that matter. In “TouchPoints: The Power of Leading in the Moment,” Conant and Norgaard (2012) argue that middle school students must find a productive way to navigate this daily incessant stream of interactions. Pointedly, the authors contend that students need to stop viewing interactions as interruptions and begin seeing them as opportunities to lead.

Each of us can likely recall an interpersonal interaction in our own lives when a parent, grandparent, coach, mentor, or peer said just the right thing, at just the right time, in just the right way, at just the right moment to impact our lives. By tapping into the power of purposeful social interactions, middle school students can learn to become the kind of leader who has a positive impact on others. Initially, the resonance of an interpersonal interaction for middle school students resides in sensing that others are coming to you for a reason. Thus, the last thing that a middle school student wants to do is to act in a way that makes his or her peers feel that they are a bother or that their issues are trivial. Ultimately, leadership mastery for middle school students is about being present to others and to their concerns and issues. Moreover, leadership mastery is about creating energy and direction regarding things that matter to others (Conant and Norgaard 2012). For middle school students, the requisite leadership disposition is one of reaching out to those around you, sharing your vision with them, and enlisting them in a common purpose.

### Leading Peers by Being “In Influence” versus Being “In Control”

For middle school students, interpersonal interactions mirror the essence of 21st-century leadership development—being “in influence” as opposed to being “in control” (Ellinor and Gerard 1998, xxx). In an era of unpredictable and exponential change, leaders tend to be “in influence” as opposed to being “in control” as they adapt to unforeseen realities (Ellinor and Gerard 1998, xxx). Forward-looking leaders of any age are understandably realistic about what they can and cannot change in their own and in others’ lives. In daily practice, leaders embrace the notion that the basic building blocks of organizational life are relationships, not individuals. Thus, memorable leaders are committed to changing lives by thinking and acting

collaboratively with others on promising ideas to accomplish things. Class projects, journal entries, and text messages represent genuine opportunities for middle school students to declare themselves, express what is on their mind, articulate what they are passionate about, and identify what they are committed to accomplishing collaboratively. For middle school educators, the challenge is to craft leadership development opportunities that leverage the natural propensity of students to cooperate in communities of engagement—to feel fully seen, fully listened to, and fully trusted to contribute. From that perspective, the leadership dynamic in one's middle school becomes “engaging and engaged, connecting and connected, and supporting and supported” (Mintzberg 2009, 235).

### Leading Followers through Dialogue

Interpersonal interactions underscore a fundamental leadership skill: to listen to others intently, frame others' core concerns, and advance the other person's interests through dialogue (Conant and Norgaard 2012). The practice of dialogue is as old as humankind itself. Throughout the ages, dialogue has ritualized the need for people to remember who they are and where they came from (Ellinor and Gerard 1998). In diverse cultures and settings, dialogue has functioned as a tool for listening intently to others to foster shared meaning and create community. Dialogue tests leaders' capacity for connectedness. For middle school students, leadership mastery mirrors one's capacity to enter into relationships and community with “the other” (Palmer 2001, 32). Dialogue in the contemporary classroom creates a structure for sharing what matters most to students in their life and academic work, including their beliefs, values, motivations, and sources of joy. Dialogue in instructional settings also serves to create trust and mutual respect and to sustain a spirit of inquiry. The dialogic process invites students to fill the synapses between one another with communication, connection, relationships, and collaboration. For middle school students, dialogue functions as a gentle reminder that students are in a relationship, but without the burden of having to be in control of their classroom or campus. Specifically, dialogue in campus settings functions as the language of conversation so that middle school students can learn from others' authentic life experiences. When a palpable sense of dialogue is created in academic settings, “it is so deeply gratifying that followers will call the person who created it their leader” (Goffee and Jones 2001, 148).

### Leading Classmates through Bursts of Interaction in the Interruption Age

The free flow of information in our hyperconnected, hypertransparent world has irrevocably changed the ways human beings interrelate. As a result, “we will never become *less* connected” and “we will never be-

come *less* transparent” (Seidman 2007, 39). For middle school students, incessant social interactions foreshadow a broader societal workplace reality. That is, “work has to get done though ever-shorter bursts of interaction” in an era in which it feels as though “the information age has morphed into the interruption age” (Conant and Norgaard 2012, 44). Pointedly, fragmented work today is common practice for knowledge workers in diverse fields. Mark, Gonzalez, and Harris (2005) observed that the contemporary knowledge worker is interrupted externally every 11 minutes. Within that span of 11 minutes, workers tend to interrupt themselves internally at least twice as they search for new information or seek to cement interpersonal connections. The leadership lesson for middle school students is that with less than four minutes of uninterrupted time, knowledge workers' tasks have to be completed in ever-shorter bursts of productive interactions. Thus, today's middle school students—as tomorrow's leaders—require both classroom and campus-wide opportunities to begin to master how “to make decisions and mobilize others *right now*” (Conant and Norgaard 2012, 44).

### Leading Others through Exercising Executive and Legislative Leadership Skills

The complex governance and diffuse power structures common to social-sector organizations, including schools, highlight the need for middle school students to cultivate two contrasting types of leadership skills: executive and legislative. In *executive* leadership, the individual leader has sufficient concentrated power to make the right decision right now. A middle school principal, for example, has the power to make a decision regarding who gets suspended for fighting or even what type of music will be permitted at school dances. For middle school students, the everydayness of life in academe is punctuated by the disquieting realization that most decisions in the classroom and in the main office are made by the individual who has the power of decision rights—yes, sometimes seemingly not the right person, or the most caring person, or the most qualified person, and characteristically not you (Goldsmith 2010).

What is less obvious to middle school students, however, is that *legislative* leadership in organizational life is rooted in the realization that “you always have power if you just know where to find it. Power is all around you to draw upon, but it is rarely raw, rarely visible” (Collins 2005, 10). Relatedly, in developing their leadership capabilities, middle school students require everyday opportunities to tap into “the power of inclusion, and the power of language, and the power of shared interests, and the power of coalition” in shaping class projects and successfully completing collaborative class activities (Collins 2005, 10). Ultimately, whether honing students' executive or legislative leadership capabilities, the long-term goal is the same: to strengthen

middle school students' capacities to ensure that "the right decisions happen" for the greatness of one's institution through the achievement of its mission and vision (Collins 2005, 11).

### Leading Followers by Serving First

Leadership is not about oneself. It is about others. The distillate of that realization is captured in the philosophy of the Frances Hesselbein Leadership Institute: "To serve is to live." Leaders who serve are ambitious for the work, the cause, the movement, the mission—not themselves. In daily practice, a philosophy of serving leadership forces a fundamental question: Do those being served become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely to serve others? (Greenleaf 1977). The belief that "to serve is to live" mirrors a *natural* feeling that one truly wants to serve—to serve first, then lead. Middle school students, as serving leaders, are intimately connected to the lives of others in their quest to "give something back." Serving leadership is "serious meddling in other people's lives," whether raking leaves for the homebound, mentoring at-risk elementary students in a neighboring school, raising money in support of a local food pantry, or planting trees for the enjoyment of future generations (DePree 1992, 17). In the ultimate sense, the exercise of serving leadership for middle school students is accountability that is self-inflicted in the service of others.

### Leading by Exhorting "All Heroes to Go Home"

The poet William Stafford intimated that it is truly time for all heroes to go home. Yet, middle school students and educators continue to honor diverse heroes such as our nation's former presidents, military leaders, and spiritual mentors through an array of commemorations. Admittedly, the United States loves a hero, as does much of the rest of the world. Perhaps it could be argued that this shared sentiment reflects a universal desire "to be saved, to not have to do the hard work, to rely on someone else to figure things out" (Frieze and Wheatley 2011, 27).

Almost daily, middle school students are peppered by the seductive image of politicians who present themselves as heroes with enticing promises such as the now familiar "hope and change" and "I've spent my life in the private sector and I know how to turn this economy around." It is an all-too-familiar script, irrespective of one's political orientation. For middle school students, however, the leadership implications of those scripted political assertions are unsettling: "there is someone in our midst that is visionary, inspiring, and brilliant—someone who possesses definitive answers to today's daunting problems, and needs only for us to follow along to somewhere." The companion leadership implication is that as our nation's problems become more complex and difficult, power needs to be moved

to the top of the command-and-control hierarchy, as individuals willingly "surrender autonomy in exchange for security" (Frieze and Wheatley 2011, 27). Finally, when things go wrong, followers predictably dismiss their flawed leader and renew the search for the next inspiring, brilliant, visionary leader.

### Leading Others by Serving as Leader-as-Host

In contrast, George Washington was an authentic leader whose storied contribution was changing 13 diverse colonies into one nation. He created a single national identity by getting the affluent class in Virginia, the 55 delegates of the Continental Congress, and the officer class of the Continental Army to talk about what united them: valuing freedom (Chernow 2010). Washington's brilliance was that "the man and the cause became synonymous," with the leader shaping the new nation and the nation calling forth the leader (Logan, King, and Fischer-Wright 2008, 5). The distinctive leadership trait that Washington exhibited was not that of leader-as-hero but rather that of leader-as-host. Leaders-as-hosts sense contextually that "hosting others is the only way to get large-scale, intractable problems solved" (Frieze and Wheatley 2011, 28). Leaders who act as hosts rely on others' creativity and commitment, see potential and talent in others that those individuals may not see in themselves, and appreciate that individuals will likely support only those things that they have had a hand in creating. For middle school students, the leadership lesson is that it is time to stop waiting for someone else to save us. Rather, it is time to stay in inquiry and service by mobilizing the hearts and minds of classmates in engendering fresh insights and possibilities for confronting shared societal challenges and problems such as poverty, substance abuse, environmental degradation, and educational standards. In that sense, leadership is less about what one does and more about what one becomes and, in the process, how one influences and learns from others (Bali 2011).

### Leading by Building Trusting Relationships

Human beings enter the world confronted with a daunting challenge: being physically premature and highly dependent on caretakers. In that sense, newborns struggle physically and emotionally to make social connections. The evidence is engaging: "within *one hour* of birth, a human infant will draw her head back to look into the eyes of the person gazing at her. Within a few more hours, the infant will orient her head in the direction of her mother's voice. And, unbelievable as it may seem, it's only a matter of hours before the infant can actually mimic a caretaker's expressions" (Kramer 2009, 70). Kramer's research findings suggest that "human beings are naturally predisposed to trust—it's in our genes and our childhood learning—and by and large it's a survival mechanism that has served our species well" (70).

For middle school students, being perceived as a trustworthy leader begins with cultivating respect for oneself. If one cannot trust oneself, it becomes difficult to trust others. Moreover, being respectful of the common welfare requires that one “be willing to listen, to ‘re-look,’ and reconsider what the other person has to say” (Ellinor and Gerard 1998, 180–81). To grow as leaders, students have to learn to trust wisely and well. To function optimally in academic and future workplace settings, middle school students will need opportunities to create the circles of trust through caring, transparent, and honest behavior, which will allow them to work laterally in many directions at once in settings without formal hierarchical structures (Friedman 2006). Overly trusting behavior, either in private conversations or on the Internet, occasionally sets up students for potential grief (Bowman 2012). While extending trust is a rational act, students’ propensity to trust others makes them vulnerable. Thus, middle school students need sustained opportunities to build prudent, incremental foundations of trust before sharing sensitive information or disclosing personal secrets. Because trust entails understandable risk for students in the early stages of a relationship, the notion of *shallow trust* captures the kinds of small but productive behaviors through which students can communicate their own willingness to trust others. Specifically, “salting your world with lots of small trusting acts sends a signal to others who are themselves interested in building good relationships” while climbing the ladder of trust together (Kramer 2009, 75).

### Leadership as a Lens to View One’s World

Leadership for middle school students is a lens through which to view one’s world, not a checklist of things to do. For middle school students, leadership in academic settings involves looking at everything that one does with new weight and meaning to influence the lives of those in one’s midst. Leadership in instructional settings is a disposition, a way of viewing the challenges that one faces every day. A leadership orientation invites middle school students to generate a text message as a leader, engage in a student advisory meeting as a leader, generate a team instructional report as a leader, and participate in volleyball practice as a leader. A leadership disposition for middle school students is compelling: one leads one’s own journey of significance every day in how one listens and speaks to the higher selves of others and how one inspires others’ efforts to pursue goals greater than themselves (Seidman 2007). Ultimately, leadership for middle school students is about inspiration. It is about how to keep the call to *significance* alive in one’s classmates and teachers.

### Conclusion

When Alexis de Tocqueville began his journey throughout America’s vast and open spaces in 1831, he astutely perceived the genius of American society: its respect for what the French observer called *self-interest properly understood*. Early Americans uniquely cared for everyone else’s self. That is, “they instinctively understood that respect for the common welfare is in fact the precondition for one’s own ultimate well-being” (Brzezinski 2011). The leadership lesson for today’s middle school students is that respect for the common welfare remains the centerpiece of serving, productive, breakthrough leadership (Bowman 2012). It is respect for the common welfare that inspires the highest in human conduct and interrelations in one’s journey to self-governance.

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